Teaching Phonics in Context debunks the myth that whole language teachers do not teach phonics. Through classroom vignettes, experienced educators David Hornsby and Lorraine Wilson show precisely how phonics can be used in literacy-rich classrooms.

The book is grounded on these beliefs:

- That reading and writing of connected text takes priority over the traditional teaching of phonics
- That teaching and learning of phonics is always contained within, and subordinate to, genuine literacy events
- That children spend much more time reading and writing (in which they learn to apply their phonic knowledge) than they do in the actual study of sound–letter relationships

The authors describe classrooms that shimmer and shine with stories, read-alouds, writing, science, language play, singing, rhyme, poetry, role-play, and laughter.

Samples of student writing are discussed, illustrating how teachers can help young children become better writers. The authors share ideas for reading, interpreting, and enjoying picture books, as well as which specific sound–letter relationships work well when engaging with particular titles. The authors outline innovative ways of working with rhymes, including listening to and identifying rhyming words, identifying individual sounds, and discovering sound–letter patterns.

This book offers a wealth of professional knowledge teachers can use to make informed, independent decisions about teaching phonics in the context of authentic literacy events. Valuable advice also is offered for using these strategies with ELL students.
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We have written this book for teachers caught in the crossfire of competing ideologies when dealing with the teaching and learning of phonics.

The current debate as to whether to teach phonics is nonsense. Of course we teach phonics! Rather, the debate should be: how can teachers best plan for children to learn phonics in such ways that, when necessary, they can apply phonic knowledge to read and write with purpose and understanding?

Teachers need practical advice based on accurate information and wide-ranging research. As educators with more than ninety years of combined experience, we include many examples of classroom practice to illustrate rich, meaningful, relevant, and contextualized teaching and learning of phonics; we describe practice that is supported by a vast body of research.

To teach phonics in decontextualized ways, such as reading nonsense words or following a prescribed sequence of letter-sound relationships, is to waste time, dim minds, and pervert children’s understandings about written language.

We have grandchildren and grandnieces and grandnephews entering the school system. These children are joyful, curious, and excited by learning. We do not want the vitality in their steps and the smiles on their faces to fade because they are immersed in mindless phonic drills.
In Chapter 1, we invite you to step into classrooms where teachers are teaching phonics effectively. We provide images of classrooms in which reading and writing of connected text takes priority and the teaching of skills, such as graphophonic skills, is embedded within meaningful literacy events.

In Chapter 2, we provide the theoretical background supporting this approach. It is based on current understandings about language, about how children learn to read and write, and about conditions for learning.

Here, we provide a brief overview of the different ways in which teachers support contextual skills learning through:

- oral language
- shared writing
- personal (independent) writing
- reading
- fun with rhymes
- pen pal letters
- science and the content areas

In this chapter we provide only short snapshots of time during a normal classroom day, but they will help you to see images of effective classrooms—classrooms that help children learn to recognize words in reading and to spell words in writing. The following chapters go into more detail.

Our aim is to show how phonics skills (indeed, all skills) are best learned when they are embedded in oral language interplay and authentic literacy events.
Snapshot: Oral Language

Classrooms that shimmer and shine with lots of storytelling, read-alouds, writing, language play, singing, rhyme, and poetry, spontaneous chatter, directed discussion, role-play, laughter . . . these are the classrooms that develop a love of language, an interest in words, and the confidence to use oral language.

In these classrooms, there are opportunities for significant social development as well as oral language development. And there are opportunities for thinking!

A child participates in role-play at Croydon West Primary School.
Most of us, as the saying goes, do not know what we think till we hear what we say. Provided, that is, we know how to talk well. (Chambers, 1994, p. 10)

While listening and talking, children tease out understandings, ask questions, make their needs known, socialize and make friends, and learn how to negotiate. In other words, oral language serves a multitude of important life purposes. In addition, it provides the opportunities for us to help children become more interested in words and more attentive to the sounds within words—the very things we need to develop if children are to benefit from phonics instruction.

Children need opportunities to talk. How else can their oral language improve? How else can they become more aware of the sounds of their language? Hansen reminds us that:

Children enter school with oral language as their mode of expression. They need time to tell us the things they want us to know, happenings they want to share. The more they share, the more they have to tell us. (1987, p. 80)

Of course, children come to school with different experiences of language. They arrive with the language of their family and their neighborhood or community. Some will have mature syntax for their age and an extensive vocabulary; others will not. Some will speak English; others will not.

We know that oral language is the foundation for literacy. Indeed, we remember James Britton’s words (1970, p. 164):

Reading and writing float on a sea of talk.

Partly in recognition of the importance of oral language for all learning, many kindergarten through third-grade classrooms set time aside for what they call explorations or investigations. During this time, the children are involved in hands-on, experiential learning. A major focus during this time is the development of oral language.

The kindergarten through third-grade children at Croydon West Primary School in Melbourne (see photo on p. 4) have plenty of time for oral language development. Every day, they start with one-and-a-half hours of exploration time, or project-based learning. The photograph shows one group of children during share time.

Sadly, because of concerns about control, teachers often limit the talk in their classrooms. However, during exploration time in these kinds of classrooms, control is rarely the problem that traditional teachers imagine. When we were in a classroom at Croydon West Primary School with several visiting teachers from
other schools, the visiting teachers were astounded by how the children continued to be engaged in their investigations despite the fact that they, the visitors, had hijacked the teachers to ask about the program. They were also impressed (and perhaps relieved) to hear that the noise in the room was a low-level, working hum. It wasn’t the chaos that might have invaded their nightmares.

The kind of engagement we see at schools like Croydon West is one of the results when a program allows children to:

- explore things that matter to them
- be involved in hands-on activity
- choose their own activities and lines of inquiry
- set their own questions
- move from existing knowledge to new knowledge
- develop a common understanding about the norms and values in the classroom
- develop “habits of mind” (Costa & Kallick, 2000)
• be unhurried; be allowed to take the time needed to solve a problem or work through an inquiry. (Walker, 2005)

Many other schools in Melbourne, where we live, have developed similar project–based learning programs—particularly in their kindergarten through third-grade years. Research from the University of London about the importance of hands-on, experiential play was reported in The Guardian:

Eleven- and 12-year-old children are now on average between two and three years behind where they were 15 years ago in terms of cognitive and conceptual development. The most likely reasons are . . . the lack of experiential play in primary schools and the growth of a video-game, TV culture. Both take away the kind of hands-on play that allows kids to experience how the world works in practice and to make informed judgments about abstract concepts. (The Guardian, 24 January 2006)

See Chapter 3 for information on learning about the sounds of our language.

Snapshot: Shared Writing

When the teacher writes with children observing, and when they jointly construct text, it is important to reinforce concepts such as sentence, word, letter, capital letter, left to right, sound, and so on. When the children observe you writing, think aloud for them; provide appropriate explanations about what you are doing and use terms to describe aspects of the language you are using. Then, during shared writing, expect the children to share their thoughts as well. Teachers of beginning writers need to reinforce concepts about our written language again and again. The more we help children to talk about these concepts, the more they begin self-talk when they are writing independently. In other words, they begin to monitor their own writing.

Only when they understand concepts such as word, letter, and sound, as they relate to written language, can children benefit from phonics teaching. Early understandings about sound and word may not be sufficiently developed for phonics instruction to make any sense. For example, some children may think a sound is only a sound they hear in the environment; they may not understand that it’s a component of a spoken word.

After you have demonstrated by writing something for the children, read the piece back to them. If appropriate, have them read it with you. Ask questions such as:
How many sentences did I write today?
How can you check?
How many words did I write?
How many capital letters did I use? Why did I use them?
What is the shortest word?
What is the longest word?
How many words start with the letter b?
How many words contain the letter b?
How many words start with the /m/ sound?
How many words have the /ee/ sound as in seen? What are those words?
How is the long /ee/ sound spelled?

Of course, these are the same kinds of questions you will ask after a piece has been written during shared writing. But during shared writing, you can also employ a shared pen technique and get the children to help you with the secretarial role of putting the written words on paper. For example, you might ask questions such as: “Who knows the letter I need to write next? Can you come out and write it for us? Tommy, I think you know what letters we have to write for the /oʊ/ sound here. Will you write them for us? Bella, I saw you write pets in your own writing yesterday. Will you write it for us now? Who can put the correct punctuation mark at the end of the sentence for us?”

Teachers often refer to this form of writing, when the pen is shared, as interactive writing. While the writing work is being done on the board or chart paper, you will sometimes have each child writing his or her own copy on an individual whiteboard or on paper. This allows you to provide assistance to children as they are actually writing. With this kind of approach, you can provide the support that struggling writers need. Typically, you will write fairly short texts together, including:

A daily news items
A response to something read
A fact the children have learned recently
A joke
A rhyme
A tongue twister
A recipe
A description of a hobby
A critique of a film
A weather report
A rule for classroom behavior
A wish
An invitation
An apology
A poster to advertise something
A Wanted poster
A persuasive letter

Interactive writing can also work very well with writing buddies (cross-age tutoring). Students of different ages love working together. The younger students benefit from one-on-one help, and the older students benefit from providing that help.

**Snapshot: Personal Writing**

Personal or independent writing provides the ideal opportunity for learning and consolidating sound–letter relationships. This idea is not new. It was discussed by Maria Montessori at the beginning of the last century and researched during the 1970s by people such as Carol Chomsky, Marie Clay, and Glenda Bissex. It has been supported by many other researchers since.

Chomsky gave evidence that children are ready to write before they are ready to read and that reading instruction can grow out of the abilities children develop when they are allowed to use temporary spellings during their personal writing. She advocated that children should write first, and then be taught to read.
One advantage of this approach is that it will help children make sense of phonics, when they are introduced to phonics. I think that is a very, very useful insight. (Chomsky, 1976, p. 43)

Young children can use their knowledge of letter names and sounds to write words “quite accurately and consistently.” Chomsky referred to the work of Read (1971) and Bissex (1980) whose research also showed that young children invent spellings to write what they want to write before they can read.

Young children (including preschool children) who can’t yet read the simplest texts independently might nevertheless be able to write:

R u OK  (Are you OK?)
I kn c u.  (I can see you.)

At the earliest stage, young writers often use letter names to spell words:

B (be)  U (you)  R (are)

As they learn more of the sound–letter relationships for consonants, they begin to control more of the dominant consonant sounds in words and write letters to represent them:

T K (talk)  F E L (feel)  L A D e (lady)

Since they don’t have established visual patterns for many words yet, they generally spell words as they sound to them and using letters they know:

CHRi (try)  JRES (dress)

They spell the short vowel sounds according to where they are articulated. In other words, they spell them according to how they feel in their mouth, such as FES (fish). E is for the short /i/ sound because, when they say the name of the letter E, it is close to the place in their mouth where they produce the short /i/ sound. (You, the teacher, could say it and feel it now to prove it to yourself.)

To write the words in their heads, young writers often say the words again and again as they try to pay attention to the sounds. They then represent the sounds in the best way they can according to their current sound–letter knowledge. Even before they start school, many know the names of several letters,
especially the letter that starts their name, and they may even know some common sound–letter relationships. Graves’s research in the 1970s and ’80s showed that young children start to use temporary (or invented) spellings once they know about six letters (see Figure 1.1).

Clearly, when you are talking with the children about their daily writing, you are getting constant feedback about the sound–letter relationships they know, the ones they are confusing, and the ones they still need to learn. This informs your teaching and is one of the best starting points for your planning.

See Chapter 6 for more details about teaching phonics in the context of writing.

![Figure 1.1. A sample of early writing.](image-url)
Snapshot: Reading

In his book *Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk*, Aiden Chambers makes the following point:

There is a correlation between the richness of the reading environment in which readers live and the richness of their talk about what they’ve read. (Chambers, 1993, p. 11)

We would take this argument further:

There is a correlation between the richness of the reading environment in which readers live and the richness of their phonics program.

When young children are immersed in high-quality texts—including stories, poems, rhymes, and information books of all kinds—there are possibilities for high-quality phonics teaching. High-quality texts expose children to all possible sound–letter relationships and therefore have potential for children to make discoveries. Many commercial phonics programs restrict children’s learning to one new sound–letter relationship at a time; there is no potential for discovery. Commercial phonics programs slow learning down because they look at only one phonic element at a time. Children are capable of so much more!

When reading to children, and during shared reading, you involve children in active listening and talk with them about words that have the same sounds. You emphasize alliteration and play with it in ways that help the children pay attention to initial sounds and learn initial sound–letter relationships. You capitalize on rhyming words as a springboard to helping children learn common spelling, or rime, patterns. You list words that have common visual patterns, common sound patterns, or common meaning patterns.

Chapter 7 provides details of different ways to teach phonics through reading. The following example is provided to whet your appetite!


It’s a hot, dry day. Neligan’s pig is getting hotter and hotter as it watches the ducks and the geese in the cool pond water. All of a sudden, there’s a huge splash as Neligan’s pig jumps in the pond. All the other animals come to see, and then Neligan himself arrives, takes off his clothes, and jumps in too!
Children love this story, and opportunities for joining in during repeated readings are numerous. The children delight in reading the animal sounds: *Quack! Honk! Oink!* And there are many repetitive phrases that invite the children to read along.

Seize the opportunities provided when children spontaneously comment on letters and letter patterns they notice. Select, from the following possibilities, the sound–letter relationships or spelling patterns relevant for the children you teach.

Initial sound–letter relationships:
- **p** /p/  *pig pond*
- **g** /g/  *gulp gasped geese*

Digraph:
- **sh**  *shone she splash shirt*

Blends:
- **s** blends:
  - /sk/  *sky*
  - /sw/  *swim*
  - /spr/  *spread*
  - /st/  *stamping*

Rhyming words:
- *pond*
- *wand*
- *bond*

Subgroup and extend:  *pond wand*  *(a = short /ɒ/)*
- *bond was*
- *fond want*
- *blond what*
- *wash salt halt*
Snapshot: Fun with Rhymes

The Messy Mud Monster

I know a messy mud monster,
It comes around each day.
It makes messes everywhere
When it tries to play.

Mud’s mucky and it’s yucky;
It gets on all the rugs.
It’s icky and it’s sticky —
I think it’s made of bugs.

Just yesterday the monster played
Under our apple tree.
It messed a lot. Oh no, guess what?
The messy monster’s me!

— Jaz Stutley

Read the poem for enjoyment and allow spontaneous response (including lots of opportunity to discuss personal stories involving mud).

Part of phonics teaching is helping children to pay attention to specific sounds, so say, “Listen to me say mud as I stretch out the first sound: mmm-mmmud.” Invite the children to say mud and stretch out the first sound with you. Ask, “What sound can you hear at the beginning of the word mud?” (Answer: /m/) Then ask, “What letter do we write for that sound?” (Answer: em.) Write the word mud on the board.

Now you might ask the children to listen as you say “mmmmmessy mmm-mmud.” Invite them to say it and stretch out the first sounds. Write messy mud on the board. Ask the children if they can think of any other m words to describe mud. List them:

mucky mud
magnificent mud
marvelous mud
messy mud

They may even think of some unusual m words to describe mud. If so, add them to the list:
magic mud

mad mud

mean mud

Read through the list, emphasizing the /m/ sound at the beginning of each word. Start an Mm chart by writing Mm at the top and then writing the word mud. Ask, “Whose names begin with /m/?” List them on the Mm chart. Ask the children for any other words they know that start with the letter m or the /m/ sound, and list them on the chart too. Add other m /m/ words to the chart over the next few days. (If they give you a word with the letter m in medial or final position, be thrilled! Add those words to a right-hand margin or the bottom of the chart.)

You could make up an alliterative phrase such as:

Mike and Maria made messy, mucky mud.

The children can have fun repeating the phrase while emphasizing the /m/ sound at the beginning of all the m words.

They could practice handwriting the letter m. You could ask the children to find words starting with M or m in old magazines, or pictures of objects whose names start with m. They can cut them out and make an Mm collage, or stick all the words and pictures on a big cardboard cutout of the letter m.

You could follow up with other books that feature m words, such as these two by author Jeanne Willis and illustrator Tony Ross (see Figures 1.2a and 1.2b).

FIGURE 1.2a. The front cover of Misery Moo. FIGURE 1.2b. The front cover of Manky Monkey.
First, read these books to the children for pure enjoyment and spontaneous reader response. But you could re-read them, asking children to listen carefully and to shoot their hands in the air when they hear a word starting with the /mmm/ sound. (Exaggerate the length of the sound to ensure that children hear it.) List the m words on the Mm chart.

Look for evidence that the children are using the letter m to represent the /m/ sound in their writing. Continue to highlight stretchable consonants through the reading and writing events occurring in your classroom each day.

**Snapshot: Pen Pal Letters**

Involvement in pen pal letter-writing provides the kind of engaging, real-life language experience that is typical in the classrooms in which we work. There are several possibilities:

- Letters to student teachers at a local university
- Letters to residents at a local retirement village (could be tied in with an integrated unit, *From the Cradle to the Grave*)
- Email letters to children in a school nearby (could be secondary students)

Consider using Gaggle. It’s a free, filtered email network for schools and students that provides a safe, teacher-controlled environment. Go to www.gaggle.net for information.

When first starting a pen pal letter-writing program, an aim might be to find out as much as we can about our pen pals before a pen pal party. You can write letters to your pen pal as the children watch. Talk with the children about the things you want to write, the things you want to ask, how you might start, and so on. Include demonstrations of conventions such as writing the date, starting with *Dear ______*, different endings, the use of P.S., and so on. You will need to write your letter on a big piece of chart paper, so consider it a draft, and then you will rewrite on appropriate-size paper for mailing. A more time-efficient alternative is to write to your pen pal on a computer attached to an electronic whiteboard or data projector. The children can see it as you write it; then you simply click Send to email it to your pen pal.

Children share their letters with other children in the room and ask one another about their pen pals. During discussion, future questions to ask pen pals may be considered.
If drafts are handwritten first, children need to attend to conventions such as spelling and punctuation before the letters are mailed. The children will underline three or four spelling errors and try a different spelling above each one. To cater to individual differences, you can vary the number of spelling errors they retry. For some children, one or two will be an effort; others can be expected to attend to all of them. A conference then provides an ideal time to teach spelling and phonics. If a child has written skool or skul, you might say, “You have written school in two different ways. Which one do you prefer?”

The child points to second attempt, skool. “Yes. That one’s closer to being correct, because you’ve heard all the sounds in school and you’ve used more of the correct letters.

“Great. And you’ve written the correct letters for all of the sounds, except for the /k/ sound.” You then write: s _ _ o o l and say, “In school two letters together represent the /k/ sound. Do you know what they might be?”

If the child doesn’t know, you complete the word. You might then ask,

“Do you know any other words where letters ch together are used for the /k/ sound?”

You list words suggested by the child or you write some words such as Chris, ache, chemist.

After proofreading, the children copy the drafts neatly and mail them to the pen pals. Rewriting becomes authentic handwriting practice. Alternatively, the letters can be typed and printed for mailing, or they are emailed.

**Snapshot: Science**

You can help children learn phonics whenever they are involved in authentic reading and writing activities. In fact, if you’re not careful, you can end up teaching phonics all day!

The content areas of curriculum (social science, language arts, science, technology, and health) provide opportunities for lots of authentic reading and writing. In a kindergarten classroom at Pender’s Grove Primary School in Melbourne, the children were involved in some science experiments to help them understand force in terms of push and pull. Their writing showed a lot about their sound-letter knowledge and provided the teacher with opportunities for phonics teaching. Their reading of Who Sank the Boat? by Pamela Allen provided further opportunities.
A teacher and six children conduct a science experiment.

A science experiment in which a ball is pushed down into water.
One student wrote:

If we tiltd the tray,
gravete pulld the trakta doun.

Another student wrote:

Gravite was pullig the ball down,
but the fors of the worter was
pooshig it up, so it floted.

Both these samples of writing lead to some obvious teaching points. In the first example, you could focus on one or two of these sound–letter relationships:

- the -ed past-tense ending pronounced with the schwa (/ed/) sound: tilted, lifted, sorted, sifted
- the -ed past-tense ending pronounced /d/: pulled
- the long /e/ sound spelled with a final -y: gravity, heavy, runny
- the schwa sound spelling with final -or: tractor, doctor, monitor
- the /ow/ sound as in: down, town, frown

In the second example, you could focus on:

- the /ng/ sound in -ing spellings: pulling, pushing, lifting
- the /s/ sound spelled with -ce: force, grace, space
- the short /ɔ/ sound spelled with a u: push, put, full
- the long /ɔ/ sound spelled with oa: float, boat, coat

A follow-up shared reading of *Who Sank the Boat?* would provide too many further opportunities to list. However, just from words in the title, you could look at word families such as:

- who: to, do
- sank: thank, tank, bank
- boat: coat, float, moat
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